Backstage Space: The Place of the Performer

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Abstract

This thesis presents a systematic investigation of the backstage spaces of theatres in the city of Sydney, Australia, combining the documentation of eight specific theatre buildings with ethnographic accounts of performers’ activities within them. As the title of the thesis suggests, my focus throughout is to better understand the ‘place’ of performers, the ways in which performers inhabit certain physical, social, and imaginative realms. Through this thesis I assess the impact of backstage spaces on performers’ work processes, their performances, and their own understandings of what it is to be a performer.

To undertake this assessment I conduct a tripartite survey of the backstage spaces afforded performers, taking into consideration ‘perceived’ space (space as it is empirically measured), ‘conceived’ space (space as it is represented), and ‘lived’ space (space as it is experienced). Approaching this survey via Edward Casey’s understanding of ‘place,’ my analysis is informed by a range of theories, notably, spatial syntax analysis, discourse analysis, and phenomenology.

Through this thesis I develop two overarching and interconnected arguments. The first is that theatrical performance is profoundly affected by the features of backstage support spaces and by performers’ backstage practices. Building on this, the second is that a study of backstage spaces offers a particularly apposite approach to further understanding the ‘place’ of theatrical performers. I contend that the backstage spaces performers inhabit can be characterised by their very poverty and that these poor conditions testify to a widespread ignorance and ambivalence on the part of society at large towards performers’ needs. Furthermore, noting the way in which performers valorise their own abilities to compromise and adapt, I argue that backstage areas largely inform performers’ dominant discourses of professionalism and worth. Ultimately, I identify the ‘place’ of the performer as one of flux that necessitates the constant negotiation of significant tensions.
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